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SUBJECT: EDUCATION REFORM: FOR QAWMI MADRASAS TOO?

REF: A. DHAKA 235

[1](#)B. DHAKA 233

[1](#)C. 08 DHAKA 1114

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The new Awami League government recently announced plans to introduce a uniform curriculum into Bangladesh's multi-curriculumed schools. The Minister of Education told the Ambassador he intends to include qawmi madrasas (non-regulated, privately-funded Islam-focused institutions) in the new initiative, along with government-funded madrasas (known as alia madrasas) and secular schools. The minister claimed his ministry was reaching out to the qawmi madrasa community to persuade them to sign on to the initiative. The chairman of the GOB Madrasa Board of Education said he did not know of any outreach efforts and a prominent representative of the qawmi madrasa community told Emboffs he had not been contacted by the government. The secular Awami League will have to work especially hard to gain buy-in from the qawmi madrasa community for this initiative and effective government outreach should start soon if the GOB hopes to avoid emotional confrontations as implementation approaches.
END SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

[1](#)2. (C) Statistics are hard to pin down, particularly with regard to non-regulated qawmi madrasas, but one conservative estimate puts the total number of primary and secondary students in Bangladesh at 33 million, with the following breakdown by type of institution:

- 100,000 secular schools/25 million students (76 percent of students)
- 20,000 alia madrasas/5.5 million students (16 percent)
- 25,000 qawmi madrasas/2.5 million students (8 percent)

MINISTER: "UNIFORM CURRICULUM" TO INCLUDE QAWMI MADRASAS

[1](#)3. (C) Shortly after being named Minister of Education by the new Awami League government in January, Nurul Islam Nahid announced plans to introduce a uniform curriculum into Bangladeshi schools. With eleven "types" of primary schools, various forms of secondary school and semi-autonomous regional education boards, Bangladesh has a plethora of different curricula which should be unified, Nahid said at a

March 3 meeting with the Ambassador (ref A reports additional meeting detail). Nahid said his intention is to include qawmi madrasas (non-regulated, privately-funded Islam-focused institutions) in the new initiative, along with government-funded madrasas (known as alia madrasas) and secular schools. He admitted that some segments of the qawmi madrasa community would be harder to convince than others. Nahid claimed that his ministry was reaching out to the qawmi madrasa community "to persuade them," but was vague as to which entity in the behemoth Ministry of Education was leading the outreach. He said the GOB hoped to begin implementing the uniform curriculum initiative "no later than 2011."

MADRASA BOARD: NOT INTERESTED IN QAWMI MADRASAS

¶4. (C) Mohamed Yusuf is chairman of the GOB's Madrasa Education Board, an oversight entity attached to the Ministry of Education. A civil servant, he said he had been in place for two years, having previously served on the secular education board for Comilla district in eastern Bangladesh. In a February 12 meeting with Emboffs, Yusuf was forthcoming and anxious to correct what he termed widely-held misperceptions of alia madrasa education. His bottom-line assertion was that the alia madrasa government-sponsored system was close to and allied with the secular system in every important way. The text books and basic curriculum in core subjects were the same; alia students simply studied additional religious subjects. He admitted, however, that the examinations were different,, since the governing boards were different, and that the questions on alia madrasa

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exams, particularly in science, were easier., He frankly acknowledged the problems in the system, including overcrowding and lack of infrastructure, supplies and quality staff.

¶5. (C) Yusuf enthusiastically described the Education Minister's 'uniform curriculum' initiative. He said it would bring the two systems even closer than they already were, while still allowing alia madrasa students a religious focus through electives. Asked about qawmi madrasa participation in the initiative, however, he shrugged dismissively and said he really could not say what they wanted. They were not part of the government system, nor part of discussions on the proposed new curriculum, he added. He had heard that the former Caretaker Government had tried to convince them to sign on to the plan, but he did not know what the current government was doing in that regard.

THE QAWMI MADRASA PERSPECTIVE

¶6. (C) Fadlul Haque Amini is a radical Islamist firebrand usually prominently quoted in the media pronouncing on controversial issues with an Islamic angle. He leads Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ), one of the two smaller partners in the BNP-led four-party alliance, and was an MP during the BNP government. He is also the principal of the Jamia Qurania Arabia, a large qawmi madrasa and mosque in Old Dhaka,s Lalbagh district. The school has about 1,500 students and 55 teachers, with a traditional Deobandi Dars-e-Nizami curriculum.

¶7. (C) There are even or eight privately-constituted qawmi madrasa boards throughout Bangladesh. Amini is a leading figure in one of them, Befaqul Mudaressin. On broader issues, he is sometimes regarded as speaking, for qawmi madrasas, although each board is independent and there are rivalries and in-fighting among them.

¶8. (C) Emboffs met with Amini and four of his staff at his Lalbagh madrasa February 12. The meeting was conducted in Arabic, and Amini, who spoke good Arabic, was an affable

host. He denied that the government had ever had discussions with him or his representatives on the subject of curricula. He had seen stories of the "uniform curriculum" initiative in the media, but no-one had approached him on it. Amini did not say he would not talk to the government if approached, but he did say several times that one thing was non-negotiable: the focus and basis of the qawmi madrasa curriculum must be religion. The social role of the qawmi madrasa was to produce qualified Islamic clerics and religious scholars, and that cannot be compromised, he said.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Opinions in the madrasa community appear to be divided on the question of government sponsorship. Historically, and dating from the British colonial era, the qawmi madrasa is defined by its refusal to accept government assistance or oversight and its reliance on private community support. With some, these are still deeply-held beliefs. Others, however - including the staff of several provincial madrasas who spoke with Emboffs (refs B and C) - have indicated a willingness to accept government support in order to enhance the competitiveness of their students in today's job market.

¶10. (C) Viewed historically as hostile to religion-based education, the secular Awami League will have to work especially hard to gain buy-in from the qawmi madrasa community for its "uniform curriculum" initiative. Minister Nahid led the Communist Party of Bangladesh before joining the Awami League in 1994, and his well-known, strongly left-wing, credentials are unlikely to increase his appeal in devout Islamic circles. As one Islamic scholar recently remarked: "Nahid is a Marxist-atheist. How is it possible to have such a Minister of Education in a Muslim country?"

¶11. (C) Effective government outreach on this issue does not yet appear to be under way, and should start soon to avoid emotional zero-sum public confrontations with the likes of Fadlul Haque Amini as implementation approaches.

MORIARTY